



Preparing for an Internal Assessment Interview

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With proper training and preparation, most professionals can successfully negotiate an internal assessment. This article presents practical survival tips on how to effectively participate, knowing how an assessor typically behaves during an interview and knowing how one can best demonstrate compliance to standards.

When the assessor knocked on the door, the developer greeted him with "Come in."

The assessor began by introducing himself and explaining the purpose of the assessment. Senior management had requested an objective assessment to determine the level of compliance with corporate policies, processes, and procedures. When the developer seemed a little nervous, the assessor assured her that her project team members had done just fine.

After some conversation about the project and work that she was performing, the assessor asked to see the project plan and quality plan that guided the project work.

The developer produced the two documents. However, without warning, she tore up both documents, threw them in the trash can, and said "That's what I think of the assessment!"

Initially, the assessor was shocked at the reaction. "We can handle this one of two ways," said the assessor calmly. "We can stop right here, or we can take a five-minute break, you can reproduce the documents, and we can make like this incident never happened."

The two colleagues agreed to start over. The woman passed the assessment with a couple of minor notations.

Later in the conversation, the developer explained that she was ill when the assessment training was offered and pleaded with her project manager to get the training. The developer took pride in her work and did not want to be the team member that failed the assessment. As we learned later, it was an unnecessary panic.

Most people do a good job and have nothing to fear from the arrival of an assessor. However, a few tips on how to prepare for an assessment can go a long way. Preparing management and technical staff to participate in an assessment is a critical ingredient for the success of any quality management system.

The Office of Enterprise Development (OED) for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has successfully prepared management and technical staff by addressing what may occur during some types of assessment interviews.

Management and technical staff want to know what is expected of them during an assessment interview.

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Types of Assessors

Two types of assessors may come knocking—an external assessor or an internal assessor.

An external assessor is frequently portrayed as someone who comes from out of town and carries a briefcase. The external assessor assesses compliance to a standard or set of standards external to the organization, such as ISO 9001-2000, CMMI®, the IT Infrastructure Library, the FDA, and so forth. In today's competitive marketplace, it is becoming more common for organizations to build their quality management systems in such a way as to satisfy multiple external standards. Thus, the external assessor is typically an expert in one or more standards.

By comparison, an internal assessor is a company employee or contractor who may inhabit the next cubicle and stays around after the completion of the internal assessment. The internal assessor knows the work, the culture, and sometimes the people. The internal quality assessor typically performs internal assessment duties in addition to their work assignments.

Though internal assessors may not be bound by the same formalism of external assessors, they are truly professionals who determine the level of compliance to the organization's quality management system and, in some circumstances, prepare the organization for external compliance or certification.

Assessor Interview Techniques

The internal assessor structures the assessment interview by stating the endorsement of management, explaining the purpose of the assessment, and scheduling the interview at a time and place agreeable to the assessor and assessee. Since so many employees today are distributed geographically, it is necessary to conduct some assessment interviews via teleconferencing across multiple time zones.

During the actual interview itself, the person being assessed can expect the internal assessor to restate the purpose and scope of the assessment. Essentially, the assessment focuses on what's in and what's out of assessment consideration.

The internal assessor invites the assessee to speak about work practices and may ask questions, such as:

- What do you do?
- What are your roles and responsibilities?
- What software development life cycle does your project follow?
- What procedures guide your work activities?
- Does your project have a software development or a project management plan?

At some point, the conversation will

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turn towards standards compliance. The internal assessor may ask to see:

- The procedures that guide your work.
- Your documentation and records.
- Your requirements and design model.
- Your plans and reports.
- Any special processes (i.e., patch review or billing procedures).

The internal assessor verifies compliance by obtaining *objective evidence*. Objective evidence includes documentation, artifacts, tools, media, and records that demonstrate compliance to the quality management system, and, in this case, policies, directives, processes, and procedures. The internal assessor looks for requirements documentation, test plans, meeting minutes, and installation guides (as specified by the standard) as objective evidence that the standard is being followed. Opinion, statements, and hearsay do not suffice as objective evidence.

The internal assessor may also dig deeper and request very specific information, such as:

- Minutes from a particular meeting.
- A record of acceptance (e-mail).
- Results from a test.
- A review meeting log.
- A controlled version of a template.

A seasoned internal assessor may select certain minutes, reports, or tests randomly and will resist any attempt to be led.

Finally, when it is appropriate, the internal assessor may give some indication of how you did during the interview. If the internal assessor finds compliance, they may say so. Providing immediate informal feedback can foster goodwill between the internal assessor and the assessee. However, informal feedback may not be possible in every situation. The internal assessor will deliver the assessment findings during the closing meeting and in the final report.

Management and Technical Staff

As management and technical staff, you may be asking yourself, "That's nice to know what the internal assessor does, but what do I do during the assessment?"

Here are a few tips on how to participate in an assessment interview.

1. **Answer the questions directly and honestly.** Your responsibility is to provide the information requested. If you do not understand the question, then say so. If the question does not apply to you or your project, then say so. Any attempt to withhold information or to deceive only hinders the

desire to improve processes and how work gets done. If you do not know the answer to the question, say that you don't. In this case, honesty is the best policy.

2. **Do not volunteer information.** Answer the question and only the question. Resist any temptation to expand or go beyond the question asked. The internal assessor will notice when conversation is diverted or too much information is given. Simply put, let the internal assessor lead; do not volunteer unrequested information.

3. **Provide objective evidence of compliance.** Demonstrate that you are following current standards and practices by presenting relevant documentation and records. As Sergeant Joe Friday used to say on *Dragnet*, "Just the facts, ma'am."

In our earlier-mentioned assessment, the internal assessor asked to see the project's Vision document; the project manager stated that he didn't have it. The internal assessor was puzzled by this remark and inquired, "Didn't I see one in the project documentation you submitted?" The project manager turned to his computer, searched the project documentation, and—sure enough—found it. With that document, the project manager demonstrated compliance to the standard.

4. **Ask others for help.** Remember that it is the project being assessed, not the individuals. If you do not know something and you think that other project members do, you can point the internal assessor to others. A project manager or test lead may possess a wonderful grasp of the project but may not know where a particular record is stored. You can ask others for help.

5. **Have a reasonable amount of time.** Sometimes you just cannot find the requested process, procedure, or record during the assessment interview. You should be given a *reasonable amount of time* to produce the item. If you can show the requested item, even after the interview, the internal assessor will evaluate the evidence and consider the project compliant.

Coaching

More and more organizations are encouraging assessors to function as process improvement coaches. Two goals of any assessment are to 1) help employees work more efficiently and effectively and 2) improve the processes that guide how

work is done. In some quality management systems, when an assessor comes across best practices, he or she records these in the assessment findings.

At the conclusion of one assessment interview, an assessment participant asked about the existence of testing templates. The assessor said that he was taking off his assessor's hat and putting on his coaching hat, then explained that the XYZ project Test Plan contained appendices with templates for test cases, test suites, and test reports. Both walked over to view the test templates. The assessor identified the test templates as a best practice and connected one project with another.

By collecting and communicating best practices, the assessor and assessment participant help to improve the quality of an organization's products and processes.

Initially, a quality assessment may seem like a scary event. However, with a little quality preparation training and confidence in one's own professionalism, an assessment can be a valuable time to demonstrate how your work practices support the business goals of your company.

When an internal assessor comes knocking, say "Come in"—then say what you do, do what you say, and prove it. In other words, know the quality standards that guide your work, follow the standards, and demonstrate compliance when asked. ♦

About the Author



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Certified Lead Assessor, has trained quality assessors for the VA and two major telecommunications providers. He obtained both his bachelor's degree and Masters of Sacred Theology from St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore. He is currently assisting with the development of the OED's process and product quality assurance program.

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